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Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale (review)

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Book Reviews

Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale
By Catherine Orenstein
New York: Basic Books, 2002

Reviewed by Martha Hixon

One of the most resonant of the traditional folktales, Little Red Riding Hood has attracted the attention of scholars for a number of years; Catherine Orenstein's book is just the latest attempt to trace Little Red's history from her oral beginnings as cautionary tale heroine to contemporary symbol of savvy, sexy girls. *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* is an engaging and informative survey of some of the various incarnations this story has gone through from peasant morality tale to contemporary sex icon.

The benefit of this study is that Orenstein has brought together a wealth of information, both scholarly and from popular culture, and she has done so with verve and in an entertaining manner. The weakness of the book—and it is a severe one—is in her scholarly apparatus, or lack thereof: source notes are relegated to a separate chapter in the back of the book but are not identified as such in the text itself, a technique which gives the unwary reader the unfortunate impression that much of Orenstein's discussion is her own analysis or scholarship, when in fact most of the book draws on or simply summarizes the previous work of a host of scholars, including Jack Zipes and Alan Dundes, each of whom published an in-depth study of this tale several years before Orenstein. Begun as a senior thesis project at Harvard over ten years ago, and citing as intellectual influences such well-known scholars as Zipes and Maria Tatar (who also wrote glowing back-jacket blurbs for the text), the book is thus unaccountably sloppy in its acknowledgement of source material. Yet the chapter notes and extensive bibliography indicate that Orenstein indeed did do a good bit of research of all types—French court documents, pop cultural texts, both visual and printed, and a great deal of social history, in addition to the folklore and literary folktale scholarship of the last several decades. Published by Basic Books, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* is aimed at a lay rather than academic audience, which perhaps accounts for the unorthodox method of documentation, yet in trying to accommodate a more general reading audience, Orenstein has alienated academics who might otherwise enjoy reading her work.

The purpose of *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* is to consider the cultural contexts of various versions of the story of Little Red, to explore "how her tale speaks to enduring

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themes about men and women, of gender roles and how they change" (13). Orenstein has chosen ten major incarnations of the story, from earliest oral tales told by French peasants to twentieth-century American film versions, cartoons, media ads, and written revisions. Chapter 1 begins with the first printed version of the folk tale, that by Charles Perrault, and it considers not only Perrault's version of the tale but also Perrault himself and the court environment that his story addresses. Orenstein's overview of the social context of French fairy tales is basic, a mere distillation of the work of others who have previously covered the same ground. She says nothing new here except perhaps for those in her lay audience who have not previously been exposed to the history of classic fairy tales. Chapter 2 covers the story as told in the nineteenth century by the Grimms and their English translators, and again, Orenstein provides a readable but certainly not original context and explanation of how the Brothers adapted Perrault's tale to suit nineteenth-century German values and the newly developing genre of children's literature.

Chapter 3 leaps back chronologically and discusses the early oral French version of the tale, "The Grandmother's Story," as examined by twentieth-century French folklorist Paul Delarue, followed by a "quick and dirty" survey of the various methods of interpreting folktales, such as the psychoanalytic approaches of Bruno Bettelheim and Erich Fromm, the socio-historical approach of Robert Darnton, and even the heroic journey mythic pattern identified by Joseph Campbell. Chapter 4 examines medieval European stories of werewolves, such as "The Trial of Stubbe Peeter," which was widely circulated in late sixteenth-century Germany, and the possible connections between werewolf tales and Little Red's own wolf. Orenstein concludes that whereas Little Red's story traditionally was a cautionary tale to girls, werewolf stories were cautionary tales to peasants and other folk who lived on the fringes of society, exempla of what could happen if one were to stray too far from social conformity.

With Chapter 5, Orenstein is on more original ground as she begins to examine how twentieth-century Western culture has adapted and altered the story. "Red Hot Riding Hood" considers the transformation of Red Riding Hood from child to knowing adult, a girl who can take care of herself and who doesn't mind being considered a sex object. Orenstein looks at various animated films of the times, such as those by Tex Avery produced for adults in the 1930s and 1940s; magazine and television advertisements; and even the 1966 song by Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs. She concludes, "The sultry single woman has been one of Little Red Riding Hood's great twentieth-century roles" (128).

Chapters 6 and 7 recap fairly conventional twentieth-century feminist approaches to the tale: the fairy-tale poetry of Anne Sexton; the 1975 landmark book *Against Our Will* by Susan Brownmiller, which cites this fairy tale in particular as a tale of male dominance and female victimization; Clarissa Estés's *Women Who Run with*

Wolves; and various retellings by Roald Dahl, Olga Broumas, Angela Carter, Tanith Lee, and the Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement. Included in Chapter 7 ("The Company of Wolves: She-Wolf or Bitch?") are brief but intriguing discussions of a 2001 Pepsi ad starring Kim Cattrall as a sexy Red Riding Hood, a sculpture by multimedia artist Kiki Smith entitled *Daughter*, and a 1995 documentary about Jennifer Miller, the famous bearded lady. Orenstein's discussions of Smith's sculpture and of Miller focus on the fluidity of society's notions of physical normalcy and lead into Chapter 8, "The Cross-Dressing Wolf," which considers the seeming contradictory images of the male wolf dressed in female clothing as he dons Granny's clothes as a disguise. Chapter 9, "The Punishment of Red Riding Hood: Fairy-Tale Fetish," explores the relationship between fairy tale and pornography, and Chapter 10, oddly enough, combines analysis of the 1996 film *Freeway* by Matthew Bright with a discussion of Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale.

The press release accompanying the review copy of this book bills Orenstein as a "folklorist and popular culture critic," which is stretching her credentials a good bit, and claims that this study "reveals for the first time the complex sexual politics, moral ambiguities, and philosophical underpinnings" of the Little Red Riding Hood story, a claim indicative either of editorial ignorance or media hyperbole (and, in fairness, Orenstein herself makes no such assertions). In actuality, Orenstein is "a free lance writer who specializes in women's issues, Latin America, and Haiti," according to the jacket copy—a more credible claim given that she has published several articles in various news magazines on Haiti in the last ten years—and her book is the product of an "obsession" with the tale, as she says in the Acknowledgements. What Orenstein is, really, is a social journalist, a product of popular culture as much as a chronicler of it, and where she focuses her insight on pop culture renditions of the story of Little Red, she makes some intriguing and valuable contributions to seeing how this tale has resonated with twentieth-century audiences. Her book is an ambitious cultural history of one particular fairy tale, and, while much of it rehashes already established material, it does so readably and engagingly for a lay audience. Those willing to overlook the unorthodox documentation style, and those who are intrigued by the ever-changing paradigms of fairy tales as they adapt to different cultures, will find *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* entertaining and informative.

Martha Hixon is an assistant professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, where she teaches courses in children's literature and folktale and literature.

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